

Become a better booker

How to find the best deals without a travel agent



➤ **There is no science to** flying cheap. There is no magic wand to wave at jaw-dropping prices and no prayer to the travel gods that will help cut airfare. Whether you embrace the bliss of planning ahead, or you feed on the adrenaline of last-minute procrastination, armed with these practical tips, your next trip out of the heartland could cost next to nothing.

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The planner

Socks? Rolled. Boarding passes? Stashed and labeled. All liquid containers meet Transportation Security Administration guidelines? Exactly 3.4 ounces. You are a planner. You buy tickets early, pack a week in advance and arrive at the airport four hours before your flight. Despite your arduous preparation, you can still save time and money.

Fuel prices have a huge influence on airfare. An increase at the pump means an increase at the airport. There are ways to save money, though. “The big thing is checking your dates and being flexible,” says Paula Thomas, a travel consultant at Great Southern Travel. Most carriers have a 24-hour window before charging for the ticket, so details can be changed after booking.

Travelers can plan flights anywhere between 10 months in advance to the day before departure, but the best time to start booking is three to six months ahead of time. This is especially true for trips during the holiday season. It’s best to purchase tickets at least seven days in advance, Thomas says. After that, options are slim.

Regardless of how far in advance you’re planning a trip, a couple of valuable online tools are available to help you quickly find your way through the messy labyrinth of travel sites and locate good deals. A good place to start is kayak.com, a travel search engine that aggregates flight info. If you want to try your luck at bidding below industry prices on flights and hotels, check out priceline.com.

It’s also worth looking at local airports for pricing differences. Columbia Regional Airport works well with booking in advance and also has free parking. Depending on the airline and destination location, some flights heading east are cheaper from St. Louis, and flights heading west are sometimes cheaper from Kansas City.

The procrastinator

It’s down to the wire, and unfortunately there aren’t

many options left. Hair disheveled, fingers typing furiously, you search travel sites for the best deal and start hoping for bargains. “Flight full” are two words that easily invoke rage-filled tantrums. For most travelers, the greatest enemy is time. Sometimes waiting just a day can send airfare prices skyward.

In order to fill flights, carriers are known to drop prices dramatically in hopes of selling empty seats, but airlines have caught on and have been booking fewer one-stop flights to increase the amount of passengers, Thomas says. But with some help, you can find these fare sales at airfarewatchdog.com and yapta.com.

Also, if time is running short, a good strategy is to search surrounding airports for flights. If the 11:20 to San Francisco is completely booked, check flights heading to Oakland. The prices are often similar, and the vacation is saved by at least getting a ticket.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the best times to purchase airline tickets are on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Monday nights typically have some pretty good deals. Some airlines are known to update prices during the night, but price changes can also occur during the day.

Even the most adventurous travelers could be deterred by airfare prices, but with these helpful sites, the world is within reach.

Departure

Best flight sites

> Kayak.com

Offers apps for the iPhone, Android and BlackBerry

Many travel publications rate kayak.com as the best place to start planning a trip. Plug in a few details, and this search engine will pull from hundreds of travel sites to allow you to compare prices across the web on flights, hotels, rental cars and cruises. Kayak.com also lists historical fare stats to help you choose the cheapest flight time and offers e-mail alerts about price changes related to your specific plans. But keep in mind that discount carriers such as Southwest Airlines aren't always included in search results.

> Yapta.com

Offers an app for the iPhone

In addition to offering fare-tracking updates, Yapta.com tracks specific flights after tickets have been purchased on its website. Wishing you'd found a better deal for the nonstop to Miami you just bought? Enter your flight number, and if the price has decreased enough to cover re-ticketing fees, the site sends you an e-mail alert so you can get a refund or credit for the difference. Yapta.com uses the same search engine as kayak.com.

> Priceline.com

Offers an app for the iPhone

At priceline.com, you can bid below published prices on flights, hotels and rental cars. Just select an area, enter a price and credit card info, and place a bid on where you want to stay. The card is charged only if the offer is accepted. If the bid is too low, you can try again. However, if the amount is rejected, you can't bid again for 24 hours unless you're willing to settle for a lower-star hotel. Priceline.com is praised for its ability to land affordable, upscale rooms.

> Airfarewatchdog.com

An actual staff of people at airfarewatchdog.com searches for deals on flights from the U.S. and Canada and puts them on the web as soon as they're available. The site also provides useful information such as restrictions, minimum-stay requirements and a daily list of the 50 best fares around the globe, which sometimes yields round-trip flights for as low as \$20.

> Zicasso.com

If you want to travel internationally but lack the motivation to plan, zicasso.com's travel specialists can help. Want to go rock climbing in South America? Haven't figured out anything past the rock climbing part? Just provide a few details about your budget, the type of accommodations you're looking for and a vague description of what you're interested in doing. Within two business days, you'll get a free sample itinerary with price quotes from up to three travel companies.

Best hotel sites

> Hotelicopter.com, Hotelly.com, Hotelscombined.com

These three sites sift through the competition by combing through 30 or more travel sites from Hilton to Marriott for the best deals. But watch out because aggregators such as these don't always double-check that they are marketing the prices at vendor price, and the buyer might not get the cheaper fare.

> TripAdvisor.com

TripAdvisor.com lets you know what you're getting into before you arrive at your destination. With hotel reviews sorted by cost, features and type of travel, it's the site to rely on for pre-booking.

> CruiseCritic.com

Spring break is just around the corner, and for many, the idea of a cruise sounds amazing. CruiseCritic.com provides all you need to know about vacations at sea. Search the site by region or cruise line, or read user recommendations on the message boards. Although it's best to plan ahead with these voyages, the site offers last-minute deals and steals to kick off the warm-weather season.

> Yelp.com

Offers an app for smartphones
Gaining popularity and credibility for allowing consumers to tell it like it is, yelp.com is full of user feedback on hotels and hostels. You can expect those reviews and rankings to be honest and up-to-date. And with mobile apps for most smartphones, procrastinators can arrive at a destination and find a good hotel recommendation that day.

25TH ANNIVERSARY TOUR WIDESPREAD PANIC



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